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To: ["R7 Senior" <Staff>](#)
CC:
Date: 5/29/2013 11:56:16 AM
Subject: St. Louis Post-Dispatch – EPA says West Lake radiation is 'contained'

EPA says West Lake radiation is 'contained'

St. Louis Post-Dispatch – 5/29/13 – 12:10 p.m.

http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/epa-says-west-lake-radiation-is-contained/article_a640c601-8f5b-55f3-9f2a-3d55af2c139d.html

36 minutes ago • BY JEFFREY TOMICH

Cold War-era radioactive waste dumped at the West Lake Landfill in the 1970s remains contained within fenced areas and isn't seen by the Environmental Protection Agency as a health threat.

That is the conclusion of a radiological survey of the West Lake Landfill Superfund site conducted by a specially equipped EPA aircraft earlier this year.

The EPA said the survey was requested to help provide fresh data that will be used to guide decisions about remediation of the site.

The results "are consistent with previous studies that indicate the site radiological wastes remain contained," EPA Regional Administrator Karl Brooks said in a statement. "The site is securely fenced and marked with warning signs. ... A person would have to illegally trespass onto the site to be exposed to elevated levels of radiation."

The information released by EPA on Tuesday answers few if any of the questions being asked by area residents and environmental groups who continue to push to have the radioactive waste excavated and disposed of in a licensed facility.

Radioactive waste has been present at West Lake for 40 years. But a subsurface fire at the adjacent Bridgeton Sanitary Landfill that has escalated during the past year has focused increasing attention on the site and the environmental risks.

There is particular concern about the movement of the underground fire and the consequences if it reaches the area where radioactive waste is buried.

Attorney General Chris Koster earlier this month said the landfill fire was about 1,000 feet from the radioactive waste.

The owner of the Bridgeton Landfill, Republic Services Inc., insists the distance is greater, that the fire's movement has slowed and containment efforts are working. The company dismissed the potential of it reaching radioactive materials.

The EPA's latest report doesn't address the proximity of the landfill fire or the potential of it reaching the West Lake site just to the north.

The contaminated areas at West Lake cover about 40 acres of the 200-acre landfill north of Interstate 70 and west of St. Charles Rock Road. The Missouri River is less than two miles to the north. And the Spanish Village subdivision is less than a mile away.

After years of studying the site, the EPA in 2008 said it would leave the contaminated soil in place and try to contain the environmental damage by covering the site with an earthen cap and installing a groundwater monitoring system around the perimeter.

The decision prompted a backlash from environmentalists, politicians and local governments. Bridgeton, Florissant, St. Louis and St. Louis County all passed resolutions urging the agency to reconsider the plan, citing the landfill's location in the Missouri River floodplain.

They continue to urge the Army Corps of Engineers to take over the cleanup of West Lake site and remove radioactive waste as is being done at similar sites across the area.

The EPA in 2010 ordered parties responsible for the site — Cotter Corp., Republic Services, Rock Road Industries LLC and the U.S. Department of Energy — to commission a supplemental study of cleanup options.

That study was completed in December 2011. It doesn't make specific recommendations, but estimates that the cost to totally remove the waste and haul it to a licensed disposal facility could cost in excess of \$400 million. By contrast, covering the waste is estimated to cost about 10 percent of that total, or \$41 million.

Because estimated costs of each alternative exceeded the \$25 million, the plans were referred to EPA's National Remedy Review Board (NRRB).

The review board ordered additional groundwater sampling and other tests.

The aerial survey was to refresh data from previous radiation screenings of the site in the 1990s. An airplane equipped with sensitive equipment that can detect gamma radiation was used to conduct the survey because the site is overgrown with small trees and vegetation, the EPA said.

The EPA's Airborne Spectral Photometric Environmental Collection Technology (ASPECT plane) flew several low-altitude passes over the landfill site and neighboring properties on March 8.

The EPA will hold a public meeting at Pattonville High School on June 25 to discuss results of the radiological survey and plans for additional groundwater testing.